REFLECTIONS FOR THE *Week of Prayer for Christian Unity*

Day 1

". . . so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me." JOHN 17:21

Unity helps us work and live together peacefully. We feel connected with each other and all living things. The specialness of each person is valued as a gift rather than cause to be threatened or defensive. With unity we accomplish more together than we can do alone. Christian unity is an understanding that we are all one in Christ and that what we do to one another affects the entire Body. When we work together for the common good we move towards the oneness that Jesus expressed in his prayer to his Father.

TAKE ACTION

Be intentional in looking for a connection with each encounter today, either those made "in person" or through technology or social media. Recall the prayer of Jesus and ask for God's guidance in drawing you towards oneness with all of creation.

Day 2

"So we, though many, are one body in Christ and individually parts of one another." ROMANS 12:5

One of Paul's most striking analogies is his description of the Body of Christ. While each member has a particularity, all join together to form the whole. Saint Clement I described it this way: "In our body the head without the feet is nothing, neither the feet without the head. And the smallest members of our body are useful and necessary for the whole." This is another way to describe "unity in diversity". It's important to distinguish unity from uniformity, however. Imagine a world in which there was only one of everything—one color, one smell, one taste, one kind of tree or flower. The diversity that makes up the whole of creation only adds to its beauty and wonder. This also applies to the vast diversity of the human race. We differ in skin tones, language, cultural backgrounds, life experiences, and religious understanding, but we share a common need for love, compassion, mercy, understanding, and belonging.

TAKE ACTION

As you move through the day, pay attention to the diversity of those around you. What can you find to appreciate in each person? Consider what unites you to that person despite any differences in your opinions, beliefs, relationships, or life experiences.

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"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." JOHN 13:35

The early Christian community drew notice from those outside their circle by their loving care for one another as well as for the poor and marginalized. It was their loving actions that gave credence to their teaching about Jesus Christ. In his encyclical, Evangelii Gaudium, Pope Francis urges all Christians to reclaim this early example of witness rooted in love: "I especially ask Christians in communities throughout the world to offer a radiant and attractive witness of fraternal communion. Let everyone admire how you care for one another, and how you encourage and accompany one another." (EG 99) Rather than drawing attention to ourselves, however, such witness shines a light on the circle of compassion that constitutes a true community of Christ.

TAKE ACTION

There's an old adage that goes, "If you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?" Take that thought into your day. How might you serve as a witness to Christian belief and practice through the love you extend to others?

You shall love your neighbor as yourself." MATTHEW 22:39

Father Gregory Boyle notes that Jesus was not a man for others but one with them. In addition to caring for people Jesus also tried to understand their point of view. This did not mean that he agreed with everyone (consider his challenges to the Scribes and Pharisees) nor did he excuse unjust and selfish behaviors. He spoke the truth with love, ever mindful of the other's dignity in the eyes of God. In the Great Commandment he called us to love our neighbors as ourselves. Such universal love is only possible with kinship—the recognition that we belong to each other. The African term "Ubuntu" refers to the loving kindness we show one another, something summed up in the understanding that "I am because of you." Christian unity is an affirmation of the kinship that lies at the heart of the gospel. By walking with one another, we experience a small but profound part of the great Kingdom envisioned by Jesus as it continues to unfold among us.

TAKE ACTION

Reflect on what it means to love as Jesus taught us. How can you expand your understanding and call to love by moving beyond your inner circles of family, friends, and acquaintances? Practice ways to be inclusive and welcoming to all you meet today.

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"Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?" MATTHEW 7:3

Some of the most popular shows on television revolve around judging others' talents, capabilities or ideas. Contestants vie for approval from a panel of judges over their abilities to sing, dance, launch a business, or cook up a soufflé. While entertaining, such programs also contain a subtle message about those who don't make the grade. They all lose while a single winner's performance, recipe, or innovation rises to the top. There is certainly a beneficial aspect to competition but it can easily spin out of control, setting the stage for an ongoing battle between winners and losers. When Catherine of Siena, a Doctor of the Church and fourteenth century mystic, began to gain recognition for her wisdom and sense of good judgment, powerful people approached her for guidance in settling disputes. It was not easy work and Catherine noted how she dealt with it by striving to see the beauty in each soul. By recognizing the unique traits of those on either side of an issue or argument, she could help others to reconcile their differences and achieve deeper unity.

TAKE ACTION

Gauge your own tendency to judge others by the way they look, talk, behave, or by what they possess. When tempted to do so, make a conscious effort to look for something beautiful in that person's soul. Notice how your attitudes change and draw you into deeper unity with others.

"If (one) part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part is honored, all the parts share its joy." 1CORINTHIANS 12:26

Another aspect of Paul's description of the Body of Christ is how suffering in one part affects the whole. Stubbing your toe or hitting your funny bone are two examples of how this works in a physical sense. Pain isn't isolated to toe or elbow but radiates throughout the entire body. Human solidarity recognizes our unity as one human family. Being in solidarity with those who suffer awakens us to the cry of pain reverberating throughout the body of humanity. Such recognition then demands a response, starting with discernment around decisions that have consequences for ourselves and others. With such a mindset we can't in all good conscience squander resources that place a strain on other parts of the world. We can consider the ways our attitudes either add to or detract from an overall respect for human dignity. We choose leaders, support institutions, and buy products with a mind towards the welfare of those who are poor or marginalized. And we recall the Golden Rule by treating others the way we want them to treat us.

TAKE ACTION

Before deciding what to consume today, give thought to how your choice will affect another person. Do a bit of research around products honoring fair trade or treating workers justly. Pray for a discerning heart that opens in ever-increasing ways to other members of the Body of Christ.

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"I. . . urge you to live in a manner worthy of the call you have received, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another through love, striving to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace: one body and one Spirit, as you were also called to the one hope of your call; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." EPHESIANS 4:1-6

Transformation was at the heart of Jesus' teaching, one that entails a slow but steady movement towards oneness with Christ. It's also a way of moving towards what the Jesuit scientist and mystic, Teilhard de Chardin, called the Omega point—the full realization of the energy of Christ's love ". . . fusing all elements of creation (together) without losing their identity." Paul provides some pointers around this in his letter to the Ephesians: living humbly and gently, practicing patience, striving towards oneness with those in our immediate and wider circles. While worldwide unity is a daunting prospect, it is also achievable—one loving and kind action at a time.

TAKE ACTION

As the Week of Christian Unity draws to a close, review the prayers and practices in which you engaged over the past few days. Name ones you might carry forward in order to increase your participation in the work of Christian unity.

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